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Writing the Artist's Gaze: Ethics and Ekphrasis in Early Twentieth Century Historical Fiction

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This article examines portrayals of visual artists in novels by Pat Barker and A.S. Byatt, focusing on artists' appeal to writers, and the associated ethical and artistic challenges. It proposes that artist characters can offer creative ways of probing not only particular periods of history, but the creative process itself.

The Scottish poet and academic David Kinloch has written extensively on ekphrasis, using Heffernan's definition of 'the verbal representation of visual representation' (cited in Kinloch 19), to trace this interest back to an envy of the painter's 'more immediate access to the real' (19). He identifies this as 'a commonplace feeling among writers' (19). Whilst ekphrasis is predominantly associated with poetry (Krauth and Bowman 11), many novelists have written about visual artists, both real, like Tracy Chevalier's Vermeer (*Girl with a Pearl Earring* 1999), and imagined, as in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988). There are also novelists whose characters occupy a type of middle ground, a no man's land between the fictionalised and the purely fictional, based, in varying degrees, on real life artists. All such novels seek to invoke the visual artist's gaze, through that of the writer – an act which draws attention to the creative processes themselves and can thus tell us something about art, artists and their interactions with the world. Choosing which of these character models to adopt is a complex question, already familiar to writers of historical fiction. However, when dealing with the figure of the painter or potter, the issue seems particularly pertinent. Writers engaging in ekphrasis face the difficult task of recreating works of visual art on the page; taking an existing painter or painting as their subject somewhat negates this, as both writer and reader can refer to works already in the public domain – creating a shortcut to a specific image. Yet, this handling of a real-life subject can place ethical, and thus artistic, restraints on the writer. To explore these issues, two novels with artists at their centre will be examined: *Life Class* (2007) by Pat Barker and *The Children's Book* (2009) by A. S. Byatt. These texts purposely limit the analysis to depictions of British artists at the turn of the last century. Both of these novels interrogate the ethical dilemmas artists face when deciding, not only what sort of art they will produce, but also how they will live their lives as artists within a broader society, constrained by social, class and gender expectations. An analysis thus not only reveals the ekphrastic techniques used by these authors, it also implicates them, as writers, in the ethical questions they raise. This article will first examine how novelists write about artists and their art, focusing on character choice and narrative point of view; it will then go on to ask why novelists write about artists, exploring the appeal of the artist as outsider and the value of the artist's gaze; finally it will discuss the insights these novels offer as to the role of the artist, their place in the world and how they engage with it.

Barker and Byatt, writing about the period of the First World War, have both opted for the 'no man's land' character model. Neither has set out to faithfully depict particular artists but both draw on specific sources. This section seeks to explore their differing character choices and ekphrastic techniques, and consider some of the artistic, political and ethical implications.

Barker's novel, set around the Slade in 1914, features real-life cameos from the likes of Augustus John and Henry Tonks, but her three main characters are the fictional artists Elinor Brooke, Paul Tarrant and Kit Neville. The critic Hermione Lee, reviewing for *The Guardian* newspaper, proposed this who's who of the group:

The aggressive, sardonic, womanising Kit Neville, a Marinetti-like futurist, has a touch of (Christopher) Nevins and a touch of (Mark) Gertler. The less confident, northern working-class landscape painter Paul Tarrant is Paul Nash mixed with (Stanley) Spencer. The independent, androgynous crop-haired Elinor Brooke is like (Dora) Carrington without the eccentricity.

But as Lee's summary suggests, it is not clear cut. Sometimes Barker borrows physical or personality traits but often the references relate to the art each produces. For example, aligning Kit with the Futurist movement could help the reader visualise his 'very noisy paintings' (LC 35) of industrial subjects – but that would only apply to readers familiar with Futurist works such as Nevins's. In *Painting and the Novel* (1975) Jeffrey Meyers points out the potential problem with this approach:

Through numerous specific allusions we know what visual images the novelists had in mind when making their analogies. Their visualisation was based on paintings they know well...Yet the novelists demand a knowledge more specialised and a memory more precise than even the most cultured and careful reader can command (1).

However, Barker does not exclude. She is not just writing about paintings, and she is not actually writing about Nevins. She ensures that Kit is a fully formed character in his own right, often bristling with palpable frustration (professional, social and sexual) that makes him lash out at his friends and want 'to burn the National Gallery' (LC 81). Barker's deft characterisation means her artists are both reflected in, and informed by, their art. So, with the harsh and provocative Kit, the reader does not need to know Nevins, or Futurism, to know him; they can get a sense of his character through everything he says and does in the novel, and this, along with subject details, enables the reader to imagine the type of art such a personality might create. Are they then getting more or less out of the novel than a reader who simply joins the dots between the page and a painting they once saw in the Tate?

'Show, don't tell' is the mantra of many creative writing classrooms and connects to Wolfgang Iser's reception-theory. One of Iser's concerns is the role of the reader in the construction of meaning in a text – 'filling in the gaps left by the text itself' (Iser 216). It is a transformative process; the gaps in the text turn reader into writer – or painter, as it happens. But readers are used to this, as Iser notes: 'the hero in a novel must be pictured and cannot be seen...the reader must use his imagination to synthesise the information given him, and so his perception is simultaneously richer and more private...' (219). This process has been characterised by the writers and academics Krauth and Bowman as the transference of an image from the 'mind-screen' of the writer to that of the reader, which they argue renders all creative writing ekphrastic in nature (23), but rather than focusing on the accurate

replication of images or manipulation of responses, Iser is predominantly concerned with what is gained in translation.

Iser's analysis suggests that the reader with less of a grounding in fine art may have the richer experience, not only in creating their picture of characters like Kit, but in also picturing the art he creates. The problem identified by Meyers – writers asking too much of readers – is only problematic if the whole meaning of the text is bound up with pre-requisite knowledge. This could be considered elitist and is certainly not what Barker does. Meyers may well be underestimating both novelists and readers, and such a line of argument can quickly become politically questionable, as well as artistically fatal. During the act of creation, the only knowledge novelists should preoccupy themselves with is their own – whether acquired by personal experience or research. If a work of art is forced to convey the same exact meaning to everyone, to be experienced in precisely the same way by innumerable people with differing knowledge of the world, then it is reduced to the state of a road sign. Novels such as *Life Class* negate this by operating successfully on many levels, as this article will go on to demonstrate.

If writers like Barker don't necessarily require that readers know the artists or paintings they base their work on, it does raise the question of why they would base them on real life counterparts at all. Barker is a historical novelist rooted in realism, occupying the liminal space between history and fiction, and thus faced with the task of creating something that hasn't actually existed, but that is recognisable as believably of the period. It is a quality that goes back to George Lukacs' key definition of the truly historical novel as the 'derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age...' (19). It follows that just as the characters in historical fiction are drawn from a particular time and place, so too is their art. Furthermore, the two things are not easily separated; both Barker's and Byatt's novels are character-driven, the focus is on their development as a whole, but their art plays a symbolic part.

Whilst it may appear simpler to take Lukacs' line to its literal extreme, and write about real historical figures, this in turn raises questions around the ethics of borrowing. Barker, whose *Regeneration Trilogy* included real life characters, primarily W.H.R. Rivers, has strong views on the subject, as the critic Fiona Tolan highlights:

Discussing the careless or even malicious appropriation by novelists of real lives and real experiences as fictional 'material', Barker states, 'it's a point at which writing fiction then becomes quite disgusting...As Dennis Potter said, all writers have blood on their teeth.' Barker points to the moral imperative of the artist to at least deal honourably with his or her real-life subjects (378).

Perhaps Barker's Slade composites help wipe away the worst of the blood. Yet ultimately, the aim of the novelist is to tell a good story well. As Byatt notes in her criticism, novelists are 'at liberty to invent – as the historian and the biographer are not' (2000, 54). Much has been written on the tussles between history and fiction, and the blurred moral, political and artistic boundaries¹ confronting the historical novelist; what is interesting is that Barker's and Byatt's visual artists are faced with similar crises, regarding what the duty of the artist is and what makes a fit subject for art.

This is most overtly addressed by Byatt through her potter protagonist, Benedict Fludd; within an array of real-life references and fictionalised characters, Fludd appears to be loosely based on Eric Gill, with one of the key similarities being both artists' inappropriate use of their daughters as sexualised

models. As Gill's own subjects are highly questionable, some may then argue that he himself is an unfit subject for Byatt's art, and with Gill, Byatt is venturing into territory that has proved problematic for non-fiction writers. Fiona McCarthy's 1989 biography of the sculptor and designer was not only criticised for being 'morally blind', but also for publicising Gill's sexual practices whilst his daughter Petra, a victim of his abuse, was still alive (Harrison 1989). Twenty years later, Byatt's novel *The Children's Book* returns to the theme of the harmful artist-parent, and with the descriptions of Fludd's secret erotic sculptures, she, like Barker, questions the position of artist, writer, and indeed reader, as voyeur. However, Byatt's character differs from Gill in many aspects, one being the fact he is a potter rather than a stone carver. His medium has symbolic significance however and Byatt affords its materials and processes considerable attention. Here, we see the workshop through the eyes of Fludd's apprentice who has been looking at the local clays:

Fludd did import, by train, a pale creamy clay from Dorset, which he used to make pouring slip, or engobe, and mixed with the red clay to lighten it. Philip learned to pound or sieve this clay, and mix it in water. He learned to revolve the clays in the bladed pug-mill...He learned to mix clay bodies and later to mix glazes (CB 128).

These simple descriptions evoke vivid sensory responses; we are told only actions, yet we somehow smell the earthiness, imagine the sound of the pouring slip, feel the slick watered clay. Philip's direct, unsentimental observations leave plenty of room for the reader. The tactile nature of the medium is also a recurring theme in this novel where all sorts of bodies mix.

By distancing Fludd from Gill in this way Byatt is perhaps affording herself more space. Yet whilst her depiction of Fludd does not have to stay close to a real-life counterpart, he does have to ring true as a character. Fludd is certainly out of the ordinary; he's a manic-depressive creative genius who sexually abuses his daughters. But Byatt always shows us the human as well as the artist, however flawed he may be. He has 'black periods', he tells the amusingly flustered priest that he has no will and likens himself to a 'battleground', and a 'werewolf' (CB 113). His actions may not be palatable, but we at least achieve some insight into his character and motivations.

Indeed, strong characterisation is not only key to portraying a believable artist – it also plays an important part in bringing the artworks themselves to life. As previously established, each reader will paint themselves a picture, whether from memory (accurate or not) of a real painting, or from their imagination based on information given. Barker and Byatt both offer descriptions of their artists' work at certain points, but instead of merely describing visual details, they present it more effectively by showing us the reactions characters have to them. As the critic Ruth Hoberman notes:

The act of looking at art...is an act of communion with the artist's temperament. Fictive accounts emphasize the shock of this communion when it works, or the disillusionment that follows when the viewer finds himself unable to join in what Greenblatt calls 'enchanted looking' (24).

This makes the act of looking particularly interesting when the looker is themselves an artist, viewing either the work of another, or indeed their own completed creation. For Barker and Byatt this is explored very delicately through their use of close third person narration. The free, indirect style allows the point of view not only to shift focus from character to character, but to slip in and out of their thoughts too.

We are able to see art through their eyes at the same time as observing them, like in the case of Philip and his momentous encounter with Fludd's Todefright pot:

It was a large earthenware vessel, that bellied out and curved in again, to a tall neck with a fine lip. The glaze was silver-gold, with veilings of aqua-marine. The light flowed round the surface, like clouds reflected in water. It was a watery pot. There was a vertical rhythm of rising stems, waterweeds, and a dashing horizontal rhythm of irregular clouds of black-brown wriggling commas, which turned out, inspected closely, to be lifelike tadpoles with translucent tails... *This* was what he had come to look for. His fingers moved inside its contours on an imaginary wheel.

Its form clothed his sense of the shape of his body. He stood stock still and stared (CB 23).

The Todefright pot has called out to Philip. The movement in the design contrasts with his frozen awe. The pot throbs with natural forms and the language used is again sensual – watery, rhythmic. Alive with tadpoles, a visual reminder of the urge to create. Philip's reaction to the pot marks out both he and its creator, Fludd, as possessed of true artistic vision. Fludd's pots are admired by many characters, including the writer Olive Wellwood and the supposed connoisseur Prosper Cain, but it is Philip who feels them. He feels them 'clothe' him.

Of Barker's three main characters, the one we see most is Paul Tarrant. Her close third person narration lets us experience his thoughts and insecurities. We too can hear the voice of Paul's grandmother in his head, telling him to 'have nowt to do with nancy-boy stuff like art...' (LC 6). But he struggles on, dissatisfied with his style, which Kit secretly labels 'anaemic pastoral', lacking originality and force (LC 85). It isn't until he gets to Ypres that Paul feels his work progress. There he paints a picture of a gowned, masked figure infusing a gangrenous wound with hydrogen peroxide, 'the worst aspect of his duties as an orderly' (LC 203). He describes the figures in the painting as 'a white-swaddled mummy intent on causing pain. The patient was nothing: merely a blob of tortured nerves,' and his reaction to his own work is extreme. He sees it as something separate from him, but is at the same time obsessed by it. In the illness following its completion he feels the painting has infected him. He knows he has created something powerful but sees that power as essentially malevolent, 'intent on causing pain' (LC 203). It is his Dr Frankenstein moment and Barker lets the reader feel the full force of it. It is also his Dr W.H.R. Rivers² moment, as the painting's symbolism touches again on Barker's key *Regeneration* (1991) theme: the need to remember, or witness, and the inevitable pain of doing so. It is as problematic for the artist as for the psychologist.

It is interesting to consider in contrast, a novel in which the lack of characterisation fails to adequately conjure even the most well-known of painting styles. In W. Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, the character of Charles Strickland, a London stockbroker 'gone native' in Tahiti, is his version of Gauguin. Maugham may be considered on safe ground in choosing one of the most famous of the expressionist painters, but the lack of characterisation in both artist and narrator leaves the reader cold. It is particularly problematic as the novel claims to foreground the artist's personality. 'If that's singular,' the narrator says, 'I am willing to excuse a thousand faults' (1). Over the course of the novel the reader is inclined to disagree, but here Maugham is making a point about the nature of genius – does it necessarily set one apart from society?

Should great artists be judged in the same way as mere mortals, or excused as Nietzschean supermen? This question leads to an examination of the appeal artists have for writers, and readers,

and takes us towards answering a question raised in the analysis of Barker and Byatt's more successful characterisation – if readers are more interested in the characters than the art, then why make the characters artists in the first place?

'Only artists....,' begins Nietzsche, 'have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man is himself...only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes – from a distance and as it were, simplified...' (78). He goes on to conclude that 'only artists' are capable of revealing deeper truths to humanity about itself. This could then suggest that the novelist, writing about the painter, is somehow double-dipping into the well of artistic truth-telling. The key word in Nietzsche's quotation is 'distance'. Artists may strive to tell truths, or question, because they are not only observers, but often outsiders less bound by social conventions. There is a strong tradition of bohemianism³ which can bring liberation. The freedom of the artist can be seen as important because part of their role, as defined by the artist and academic Carolyn McKay, is to 'engage critically with hegemonic discourses, often in the public sphere, to identify and challenge normative parameters' (335).

Byatt's, Barker's and even Maugham's artists are unconventional in their own ways, but united in their struggle to create. This is what drives their character developments and narrative arcs. The critic Grace Stewart sees it as a form of mythic quest, symbolising 'modern man's search for existence in a meaningless universe,' and she likens the artist's quest to that for the Holy Grail, nirvana or the womb (8). And, of course, the painter's or potter's quest offers a handy stand-in for that of the novelist, and can offer writers a form of indirect catharsis.

In Byatt's *The Children's Book* Philip's quest is of epic Victorian proportions. Running away from home in the industrial north he camps out in the South Kensington Museum where he sketches the Gloucester Candlestick by day and sleeps by night 'in the shrine of an old dead saint' (CB 13). He is taken in, then apprenticed to Fludd, and it is at his pottery on the Kent marshes where Philip pursues his quest, creating beautiful pots and firing his sense of self, in the time-honoured tradition of Kentish Pips. The mentor/mentee relationship works both ways, with Philip working as a calming and ordering influence on his master. Fludd battles on with his kilns and his glazes but through Philip we see the full trajectory of the 'quest' in action.

Philip makes a proclamation of intention early in the novel; when asked why he ran away from home he responds, 'I wanted. I wanted to make something' (CB 13). Olive Wellwood assumes he wants to make something of his life, but the reader is able to see beyond Philip's inarticulateness through his sections of close third person narration: 'He didn't think exactly in language. He noticed things. The dabbling movement of a duck... Fish squirming in mud. Patterns made by the wind' (CB 157).

Like Philip, Barker's Paul Tarrant is a boy from the north who seeks his inspiration in nature. When we meet him, he is struggling to find his artistic style, storming out of the life class after criticism from Tonks, who asks him, 'Is that really the best you can do?' When he replies in the affirmative Tonks follows up with the crushing, 'Then why do it?' (LC 5). It is a question Paul wrestles with for the rest of the novel, but he is a different artist by the time he finishes his painting near the battlefields of Ypres: 'My god. It looked as if it had been painted by somebody else' (LC 203). The war has made him a different person. The cut and infection in his finger are symbolic. In the trenches of the western front they learn that mud is their biggest enemy, infecting wounds and causing gangrene. The war infects

Paul and his work. The fact it is mud is particularly pertinent; it is the land getting under Paul's skin, and he comes to see the importance of it for him as an artist. Towards the end of the novel he sees the devastation the war has brought to the Belgian countryside and writes to Elinor, 'I felt the horror of that landscape almost more than I feel for the dying. It's a dreadful thing to say...but the land we hold in trust' (LC 199). It is a powerful moment and any reader who is a fan of Paul Nash's work can't help but feel a tingle. The story is not diminished for those who don't make the connection – but it does add another layer of appreciation, summoning the brutalised landscapes of tree stumps and churned earth that would make Nash famous. We see through the character of Paul Tarrant the artist finding his great subject. It is exciting and heart-breaking. Growth as an artist has come at great personal cost.

But war is all pervasive and artists of every sort had to ask themselves how to respond. It is a question still being considered over a hundred years on, by the likes of Barker herself, whose great subject is arguably the 'great' war. She, writing in the twenty-first century, faces a different set of ethical questions from Paul Tarrant. However, she can still use him and her other artist characters to vicariously explore the question of how artists respond to war. The critic Fiona Tolan has observed a 'significant and returning anxiety in the text regarding the propensity for observation or witnessing to transmute into voyeurism and exploitation' (386). We find this in the text's many mirrors, Barker's signature 'doubling' effects and in the two incidents where Paul, in attempting to thwart peeping toms, inadvertently becomes the peeping tom. Similarly, in questioning the suitability of the war as a subject for art, Barker is bringing in not only her own work, but the reader that so eagerly consumes it.

As illustrated previously, Paul's decision to paint the war as he sees it is ultimately an empowering one. But the question of what an artist's subject and duty should be, lies at the heart of both Barker and Byatt's novels, and this final section seeks to contextualise their characters' place within society. In *Life Class*, Elinor tries to keep the war at a distance, despite going to Ypres. She likens the town to a Dutch painting that 'loves its own life...the armies can march all over it, and it doesn't care' (LC 178). But that is Elinor's view; Ypres probably does care. It will be in ruins before long.

Elinor seems to particularly object to the way the war has been foisted on them, saying 'It's unchosen, it's passive, and I don't think that's a proper subject for art' (LC 176). Paul wrestles with these opinions but ultimately finds that position untenable. By the end of the novel the reader is tempted to agree. He is, by that point, the novel's heart and soul. In the last line Barker leaves us with Paul, lying in bed with Elinor, 'waiting patiently for her to wake up' (LC 247). Elinor isn't damned for her position, though it is characterised as a selfish one. The reader detects some sympathy for her argument that artistic self-expression is *the* most important thing. But other characters see that the real battle is not to ignore the war, but to survive it, to experience it (directly or indirectly) and to create regardless.

It is perhaps Elinor who comes closest to Charles Strickland's artistic vacuum in their shared denial of relativism. As Tolan points out:

Elinor believes that art bears no responsibility to history: it has value in itself without external reference to any consequential goods that it may impart (384).

This standpoint does however leave the artist occupying rather lonely ground – arguably their natural habitat. Elinor doesn't want to be bound by the Joycean nets, or barbed wire, of history. Her experience of the war is different to Paul's, as is her experience of being an artist; she is a woman. Initially their outsider status brought them together – her gender, his class. Both had to fight factions of their family

to get to the Slade. Ironically both families' arguments centred on gender stereotypes; Paul's that it's nancy-boyish and unmasculine to paint, Elinor's that it's disreputable and unfeminine.

In *The Children's Book*, Philip, despite his working-class roots, manages to make himself an artist. For his sister Elsie, who is both working-class and female, there is little hope. When their mother dies she leaves Philip her brushes and Elsie her sewing kit, though Elsie 'would have rather have had the brushes' (CB 209). When Fludd discovers her making her own pots he asks her to model for him. Elsie's first thought is, 'he might have looked at her little pots as well as her face, and other parts of her' (CB 211). The only spheres open to her are the domestic or the sexual. In the end she finds fulfilment as a mother, but we cannot help remembering that she might still have preferred the artist's brush.

The critic Grace Stewart states that 'The dilemma of the artist is doubly frustrating for a woman' (15). She argues that conventional mythologies tell us, 'the procreative, other-directed, and nourishing role of woman is antithetical to the role of the artist' (14). Stewart sees the artist as traditionally torn between the need to be aloof from life, and the need to be immersed in it, or what Maurice Beebe has called respectively, 'The Ivory Tower' and 'The Sacred Font' (Beebe 1964, 13, quoted in Stewart 12). But for Stewart the choice for women is to either sacrifice their art to their womanhood or their womanhood to their art. Elinor's short hair is a symbol of this struggle. It makes her mother take her artistic ambitions seriously when nothing else would, though she then likens herself to 'a nun setting sail for god' (LC 79) – de-sexed.

It is difficult to consider women artists in this period without thinking of *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf 1927), and hearing like Lily Briscoe those recurring lines, 'Women can't write. Women can't paint' (130). Lily spends much of the novel trying to stay aloof enough from life to create something, defining herself against the maternal figure of Mrs Ramsay, though she is also powerfully drawn to her. According to Stewart, 'Lily perceives the canvas as her armour against human relationships that would drain her' (76). Similarly, Elinor turns down two proposals of marriage, not wanting 'to be in the kitchen cooking dinner' (LC 91). Towards the end of the novel she writes to Paul: 'If painting matters you have to give your life to it and that's what I'm doing' (LC 228). The use of sacrificial language is powerful; we are reminded of the earlier image of the nun, the cloisters, 'The Ivory Tower', but also of the battlefields where the ultimate sacrifice was actually made – by hundreds and thousands – of men.

Although none of the novels offer any single answer as to how the artist should live, they raise interesting questions applicable to artists of all forms – including the writers of novels. We have seen that the artist must grapple with certain external forces: war, politics, family, gender, and class. There is also the artist's personal quest to find their form, their subject – their self; to follow the process of creation and the perils of sending something out into the world. Like anxious mothers, doomed to produce orphans, thanks to Roland Barthes⁴. And indeed, for the artist the struggle between life and art is all, they are not only guaranteed a metaphorical death, biology insists upon it. But art can outlive. So the artist must ask themselves whether their short life should be spent living to the full or working furiously towards immortality. The question is quasi-religious in its scale. Perhaps painters in the end are so appealing for other artists to consider because they offer the ultimate redemption narrative. Of all the disciplines theirs was historically the most reluctant to convey success on the living, just consider the big names: van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne, Vermeer, Lautrec, El Greco; famous now not only on the

walls of galleries around the world, but immortalised – fictionalised – between the pages, whether they like it or not.

Notes

¹ This ongoing debate has not only been interrogated by critics such as Byatt, but also literary theorists such as Lubomir Dolezal in 'Possible Worlds of Fiction and History.' *New Literary History*. Vol.29, No.4 (Autumn 1998).

² W.H.R. Rivers, famed anthropologist and psychologist, appears in all three *Regeneration* novels.

³ Many critics trace this use of the term back to Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851). As Tickner, for example, puts it 'Murger's enduring popularity...secured the image of the rootless, free-living and heroically anti-bourgeois bohemian'.

⁴ Barthes seminal 1968 essay, 'Death of the Author,' argues that authors and critics impose limits on texts and that to 'give writing its future...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (172).

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